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Time in Chevengur.

One writer on the subject of time relates how Samuil Marshak, being in London with imperfect English and no watch, went up to someone in the street and asked: ‘What is time?’ – to which the surprised stranger explained that he was no philosopher.[1] The anecdote may remind us of how Andrei Platonov’s fictional work is full of people who, lacking equipment and unskilled in language, ask a great many helplessly profound and unanswerable questions, among them ‘What is time?’ (but never ‘What is the time?’) This question is central to the novel Chevengur[2] where, unable to endure the mystery of time, a group of men set about putting a stop to it.

This article will look at influences upon Platonov’s thinking about time, examine images and ideas of time presented in Chevengur, and seek to account for the unusual temporality of the fictional world of this novel. First, some introductory remarks.

I

Much of what Platonov wrote is based upon a conviction that the conditions of our existence are fundamentally imperfect. Time, which brings death, accounts for a large part of the imperfection. Whereas Rilke considered that we are ‘not . . . at home in the interpreted world’,[3] Platonov felt that we are not at home on earth at all, not even in the world of nature: ‘there has not been real life on earth, nor will there soon be.’ [Nastoiashchei zhizni na zemle ne bylo, i ne skoro ona budet.][4] That the whole world ought to be radically altered to accommodate human beings and fulfil their needs is an idea explored in some of his 1920s stories, perhaps most vividly in Potomki solntsa (Descendants of the Sun):[5] here a scientist

whose intellect has grown infinitely powerful re-directs rivers, knocks down mountains, harnesses the energy of light, speeds up time and finally invents a machine which will in a flash annihilate the entire cosmos before replacing it with a new and infinitely better one.

In Chevengur (1928), Platonov looks at another kind of attempt at the annihilation of 'everything' and preparation for a new universe. Eleven not very clever Bolsheviks in charge of a small provincial steppe town clear the ground for their version of Communism and believe they have brought it about. Communism entails, for them, the ending of time. Their attempt is narrated in the last third of the novel. The author did not divide the book into parts, nor even distinctly into chapters, but the twenty-seven sections suggested by gaps in the manuscript text could be grouped as follows: a first part, set in the early twentieth century, which concerns the growing up of the main hero, Aleksandr Dvanov, and describes a number of people who suffer and seek a better life; a second part, set in the years of revolution and civil war, which narrates the wanderings of Dvanov and his quixotic friend Kopenkin over the steppelands in search of that better life, now named 'Communism'; and a third part about the introduction of Communism, and with it the ending of time, in a strangely isolated town, Chevengur.

What, then, is time, so confidently brought to an end in that town? It is striking that, although the book continually touches on philosophical questions, there is no philosophical discussion in it as such, either by the author-narrator (who very rarely comes out with anything of his own) or by the characters. Similarly, while their thoughts and speeches repeatedly raise questions of definition ('What is Communism?' or 'What is Socialism?' is asked many times), they never open them up for rational consideration. When Dvanov and Gopner first meet Chepurnyi, president of the Chevengur revolutionary committee on his visit to their home town, this man, telling them about Chevengur, announces: 'In our town,

everything has ended' [U nas vsemu konets.] ' has ended?' [Chemu zh konets-to?] asks Gopner, and the reply is: 'All world history. . .' [Da vsei vsemirnoi istorii . . .] (p.190). The extraordinary reply amazes nobody and the narrative very typically continues with: 'Neither Gopner nor Dvanov asked anything further.' [Ni Gopner ni Dvanov nichego dal'she ne sprosili.] Nobody says: What on earth do you mean by saying universal history has ended? Nor does anyone ask, either of others or of themselves, why it is desirable to put an end to history, to time, to the world, to everything; nor how it can be done; nor what makes them think they have done it; nor how, believing that they have, they now regard their continuing heartbeat, speech and actions.

From Parmenides to Stephen Hawking people have tried to define time. Is it outside us, or is it a category of our thinking? Is it uniform or does it vary? Does it move past us, or move carrying us, or not move while we move through it? Is there any substance to the common metaphor, 'the flow of time'? In general there would seem to be two main applications of the word 'time': to something countable, measured by clocks and calendars, and to something uncountable but felt, differently by each of us. While it is helpful to keep these separate in ordinary exchanges, poetry and poetic prose can achieve interesting effects by combining them. When he makes Cleopatra describe herself as 'wrinkled deep in time',[6] Shakespeare evokes simultaneously the regular succession of countable years (her age) - and a sensation of temporal being which is much less easy to describe. In Chevengur, Platonov variously confounds the countable with the uncountable. His character Zakhar Pavlovich proceeds from an extreme version of the conception of time as calculable (something inside the clock's mechanism) to an opaque sensing of time as 'the movement of grief' [dvizhenie goria] (p. 56): here the two approaches are distinct; one following the other. Elsewhere in the novel they are blended: the sentence 'Time was hopelessly going away in reverse relation to life [. . .vremia beznadezhno ukhodilo obratno zhizni . . .] (p.304)', seems to refer both to the

regular passing of days or months and to some other, enigmatic sensing of time or of life without time. Both clock-measured time and subjectively felt time are related to the question (discussed below) as to whether time is a substance.

II

Among the prevalent ideas about time important to Platonov was the belief that it will come to an end, a belief which characterises some religions, notably Christianity - and particularly strongly characterises some of the Christian sects flourishing in the Voronezh region where Platonov spent his youth.[7] This belief was combined with Marxism by certain contemporary thinkers, including Aleksandr Bogdanov[8] (real name Malinovskii; 1873-1928) who had considerable influence on Platonov. Nikolai Fedorov (1828-1903) ,[9] whose philosophy was based on the conviction that humanity's sole, and fulfillable, task was the overcoming of death, and who is generally regarded as having profoundly influenced Platonov (although Platonov did not actually mention him), also expected an end to time, though he was more preoccupied with how exactly we should use our time before it ends. The conception of 'inner time' or 'duration' as being the only real time, put forward by the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941) and much discussed in Russian philosophical circles in the early twentieth century, was also well-known to Platonov.

Two thinkers whom Platonov mentioned by name and whose ideas particularly excited him are Minkowski and Spengler. The mathematician Hermann Minkowski (1864-1909)[10], who worked on Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity, became famous for declaring, in 1908, that from now on there would be no space as such or time as such but instead the single concept, 'space-time': space and time had become inseparable. In a short essay of 1921, 'Slyshnye shagi'[11] (the title refers to the 'Audible Steps' of the future as it comes towards us), Platonov reproduces Minkowski's equation (the square root of minus one, times one second, equals 300,000 kilometres) and offers two elated thoughts about it.

'This means,' he points out, 'that a certain quantity of time is equal to a certain quantity of space. They are identical, they are one…' [Znachit, nekotoraia velichina vremeni ravna nekotoroi velichine prostranstva. Oni tozhdestvenny, oni – odno.][12] This thought may lie behind the symbol which, in the novel, Aleksandr Dvanov designs for a monument to the revolution (p.147) showing the double loop of eternity intersecting with the vertical arrow of infinity, endless time intersecting with endless space, so that at the mid point (where we live) time and space coincide. In that 1921 essay Platonov writes further: 'There is an alluring, much-promising mystery in the fact that space, according to Minkowski's formula, is equal to an imaginary quantity. Here there is an indication, a closed door to a great path'. [Est' vlekushchaia, obeshchaiushchaia mnogo taina v tom, chto prostranstvo, po formule Minkovskogo, ravniaetsia mnimoi velichine. Tut est' ukazanie, zakrytaia dver' na bol'shuiu dorogu.][13]

The excited tone prefigures that in his slightly later account of a subordination of space to time which he found and commented on in Spengler's Der Untergang des Abendlandes.[14] Written two years later than the Minkowski essay, his much longer essay, 'Simfoniia soznaniia' (Symphony of Consciousness) which has been reconstructed from drafts by N. V. Kornienko,[15] is a commentary on Spengler's book (published in Russian that same year, 1923, as Zakat Evropy [The Decline of Europe]).

According to Spengler (1880-1936), every culture, on reaching its highest point of development, hardens into mere civilization. The creating becomes the created, the organic village is replaced by the immobile stone city, the present becomes the past. But the past, consisting of all the things we have made or recorded, is spatial; time becomes space. ' . . . space is past frozen time, time [is] unborn space . . .' [. .. prostranstvo est' proshloe zamerzshee vremia, vremia – nerozhdennoe prostranstvo . . .][16], writes Platonov, and – having equated history with time and nature with space - 'Nature is the shadow of history, its

waste matter, excrement.' [Priroda est' ten' istorii, ee otbrosy, ekskrementy]'.[17] The word 'time' is kept for that point between past and future at which human beings live, the 'now' at which we are creative, unreflective, absorbed in doing and making – after which the made thing drops off from the future-oriented present moment and is left behind, three-dimensional and non-living. It makes no sense, then, to say 'past time', as time means always and only the edge of the future. Platonov writes: 'That which will be is time, that which was is space.' [To, chto budet, est' vremia, to, chto bylo, est' prostranstvo.][18] Further, 'Art , perhaps, is time – and nothing more . . . History is time, and time is unrealised space , i.e. the future. Meanwhile nature is the past - time that has become formalized and frozen in the form of space' [Iskusstvo, mozhet byt', vremia – i bol'she nichego . . . Istoriia est' vremia, a vremia – neosushchestvlennoe prostranstvo, t.e. budushchee. Priroda zhe est' proshloe, oformlennoe zastyvshee v vide prostranstva vremia.][19] Thus according to Spengler, or to Platonov's reading of him, the word 'history' should be used only in this ecstatic-positive sense, meaning not the accumulation or pattern of past events but the present free and vital making of events.

It is possible that this idea of a peak-of-culture moment, a peak of presentness, of time before it deadens into space, is reflected in the description, some ten pages long, towards the end of Chevengur (pages 347-54 and 374-6), of the way everyone in the town eventually becomes engrossed in making and constructing things for each other: altruistically they repair roofs, build dams, paint pictures, write stories, and Dvanov himself becomes so happily absorbed in this that he grows thin from not eating; it is a long moment of absorption for all of them. This is not that 'time' which Chepurnyi and others wish to see the end of, but is a kind of timelessness, or time subjectively experienced and expanded. In these pages the words 'pleasure', 'satisfaction' and 'happiness' [naslazhdenie, udovletvorenie, schast'e] occur with unusual frequency, suggesting that a 'utopian' stage has been reached, and the

ever-sceptical Kopenkin is so changed by altruistic labour that he loses interest in his life's main search and aspiration: '. . . at this moment he could not have leapt up onto Proletarian Strength [his horse – A.L.] and gone rushing about the mud of the steppe towards the grave of Rosa Luxemburg. . . he was spending his sorrow on the zeal of labour . . . ' [. . . seichas on ne mog by vskochit' na Proletarskuiu Silu i mchat'sia po stepnym griaziam na mogilu Rozy Liuksemburg . . . on tratil svoiu skorb' na userdie truda . . (p. 349)

As ever, there are no general statements, no authorial explanations or interpretations, and as ever it is for the reader to do what summing up can be done: one summing up could be that, side by side with Chepurnyi's fantastic, if not lunatic, plans to abolish time, Platonov is offering here a vision of workers abolishing time in at last a sane if merely metaphorical way: through devotion to the absolute present. This central moment of what Robert Hodel[20] has called the 'second Chevengur', or 'Dvanov's Chevengur', is time not literally ended but rather discovered at last as the present, grasped and celebrated, perhaps that unification of present and future which Platonov found in Spengler – time without past, thus without the deadness of the spatial, without death. But this is only one of many approaches to the question of time.

III

Questions about time.

Platonov's essays and journalism represent something different from his fiction. As was stated earlier, no theories of time are discussed or even adumbrated in the course of Chevengur itself. But people are shown in the novel experiencing time in ways which give rise to various metaphors, one of them being that of time as a substance - an object, a movement or a flow. In fact, a common characteristic of Platonov's style is that is that it often presents abstractions as quasi-physical or compares them to physical things: 'Chevengur is wholly in Communism like a fish in a lake!' [ves' v kommunizme kak ryba b

ozere!] (p. 192); 'For communism is now in my body' [kommunizm ved' teper' v tele u menia] (p.242); time, too, is often described as something almost solid.

Zakhar Pavlovich - the first character to enter the novel (in its third sentence), a main focus of Part 1, and framingly present again at the very end of the book - is shown repeatedly enquiring into enigmas within substances. What is inside a given piece of matter that makes it work, move, have dynamic effects? With a moving inner eloquence he ponders how the locomotive power arises in a train engine, investigates with passionate curiosity the way a piano produces sound which 'makes people good' [delaet cheloveka dobrym] (p. 30), and on the very first page, before we have even learnt his name, we find him making what amounts to a double interrogation – of the earth and of a clock. How can the rotating force of the earth be harnessed so that a clock can be made to work from that force alone? He constructs a wooden clock with no winding mechanism and holds it against the ground, expecting the earth's rotation to set it going. We do not learn whether the experiment is successful, but it would seem we are meant at least to entertain the idea that it could be. This prompting of a fantastic notion which is then left uncountered, uncommented, is typical of Platonov. On almost the last page of Chevengur, Aleksandr Dvanov's descent into the lake is described in such a way ('continuing his life' [prodolzhaia svoiu zhizn'] (p. 411) that, although we know that a person determinedly walking into deep water will drown, we cannot help wondering whether just once he will not. And on the very first page, although we know that a clock requires an applied local force to cause it to 'tell the time', we are made to wonder, though fleetingly, whether this time the mere turning of the earth will be enough. The idea is left viable by certain definite devices. One is the subtle deflection of our attention from the clock's probable failure when the church warden watching the experiment objects to it - not because it cannot work but because Zakhar Pavlovich is not being paid to carry out this experiment. A second device is more complex and less visible, but all the more deserving of

mention here, since it is the first reference to time in Chevengur. In the summer Zakhar Pavlovich sleeps on the ground out in the open: after this bodily contact with the earth he gets up, in winter, to ring the night hours on the church bells. He himself thus becomes a metaphor for the kind of clock he is subsequently seen trying to invent: the earth's rotation has got into his body and it is this rotation–impelled body that now knocks at the metal of the bell, successfully telling the time. Perhaps not every reader will connect the earth-sleeper's bell-ringing with his belief that the moving earth can set a clock going. But it is patently relevant to the mystery of time in Chevengur that the very first character introduced is someone silently devoted to solving the enigmas of movement and of time.

A short way into the story, Zakhar Pavlovich makes further enquiries into the nature of time. In a passage referred to earlier in this article, he

> had not once felt time as a solid thing coming towards him, for him it existed solely as an enigma in the mechanism of the alarm clock. But when he had grasped the secret of the pendulum, he saw that there was no time, there was only the tight regular force of the spring. [.. . ni razu . . .ne oshchutil vremeni, kak vstrechnoi tverdoi veshchi, ono dlia nego sushchestvovalo lish' zagadkoi v mekhanizme budil'nika. No kogda [on] uznal tainu maiatnika, to uvidel, chto vremeni net, est' ravnomernaia tugaia sila pruzhiny.] (p.56)

Soon after this, his sudden pity for the boy Proshka, forced to go begging during the famine, is expressed as another change in his experience of time:

> He now sensed time as Proshka's journey from his mother to alien towns. He saw that time was the movement of grief and just such a palpable object as any substance, although no good for making things with. [On teper' pochuvstvoval vremia, kak puteshestvie Proshki ot materi v chuzhie goroda. On uvidel, chto vremia – eto

dvizhenie goria i takoi zhe oshchutitel'nyi predmet, kak liuboe veshchestvo, khotia by i negodnoe v otdelku.] (p.59)

Time may be a sort of object, then, not exactly solid, yet palpable, mechanical, or it may be nothing, or a movement, though not towards anything. Later, Aleksandr Dvanov, meditating on existence, senses the whole world blowing every day into, then out of, his body (p.71); which again suggests that time may be a to-and-fro movement - neither linear nor cyclical; the metaphor of 'the wind of time' is evoked.

A solidifying, and at once enigmatizing, of time takes place not only on the level of theme and motif but also of vocabulary. Here is one example. In the narrator's (overlapping with the main character, Dvanov's) voice, Platonov at one point writes: 'Sometimes it is good to let nights through/ miss nights out, without sleep.' [Byvaet khorosho izredka propuskat' nochi bez sna …] (p.192). Instead of 'provodit'' he uses 'propuskat''; with 'nochi' this could mean: to miss some nights' sleep, yet the oddity of the added 'bez sna' prompts a close look at the constituents of the verb, which yield the meaning 'to let (something go) through'. Once noticed (and it is easy <u>not</u> to notice Platonov's eccentric lexical substitutions)[21] this leads to reflection on the inherent metaphor in which nights now appear concrete or semi-solid, like water or air or anything that can travel and be let through. In such usages the author himself appears to make latent observations about the nature of time; although the quoted sentence – and possibly all Platonov's sentences – can also be read as quasi-indirect speech of the fictional character.

Questions about time are asked, further, by Kopenkin. At a meeting held in the 'Druzhba bedniaka' village commune, one of the communes he and Dvanov come across in their disorganised travelling, Kopenkin is impressed by the repeated phrase 'tekushchii moment' – the current moment, or 'the flowing moment' - more obviously 'flowing' in Russian than in English. He ponders: 'A moment, yet it flows: you can't imagine that'

['Moment, a techet: predstavit' nel'zia'] (p.147). To him a moment is motionless, just a point. How can something be <u>both</u> immobile and mobile? Kopenkin has stumbled upon the intellectually unbearable mystery of time.

At the commune meeting, the villagers are trying to develop themselves as bureaucrats. They have been holding meetings every other day, with only two items on their agenda, namely: 'the current moment' and 'current matters' [tekushchii moment . . .tekushchie dela] (p. 144)]. They now accept the suggestion that meetings should be held <u>every</u> day, or, better still, twice a day, 'in order that the flowing (or 'current') events should not flow away somewhere in vain without receiving attention…' [chtoby tekushchie sobytiia ne utekli naprasno kuda-nibud' bez vsiakogo vnimaniia.] (p.145) This is an unconfessed attempt to negate time, since if meetings to consider events take the whole of every day there will hardly be any events. The genuinely funny anti-bureaucratic satire simultaneously expresses the real dread which the rational – here the <u>newly</u> rational – mind feels of not being able to control life's multiplicities and mysteries. As Evgenii Iablokov writes, with reference to the heroes of <u>Chevengur</u> and <u>Kotlovan</u> <u>[The</u> <u>Foundation</u> <u>Pit]</u>: 'Intellect (razum) . . . has a tendency to the 'bureaucratic', utopian perception of the world, it strives to cut off the infinitely varied links between phenomena, and to declare some fragment of reality … a model of reality altogether. This is seen above all in the desire to limit space … and to stop time: essentially to abolish both.' [22]

The author uses the 'Druzhba bedniaka' commune to satirise certain commune-ist excesses - especially the bureaucratic one - well in advance of his main concern, which is the anti-bureaucratic, implicitly anarchic, Chevengur commune itself. The Chevengurians try to put a stop to time not in managemental spirit but with the existential purpose of overcoming death and in order to initiate a mode of existence in which nothing else will be cultivated except comradeship.

IV

Lament about Time

The melancholy of time sounds throughout this book in many voices. It starts, long before the revolution, with Zakhar Pavlovich, whose dateless emergence from the indefinite boundary between suburb and wild countryside opens the novel. He sees in the processes of nature something infinitely sad, and indifferent to human catastrophe, going on endlessly because of time. Rivers flow, grass grows, seasons alternate, and nothing ever changes for the better. Instead, ' . . . these regular forces hold the whole earth stunned . . .' [. . . eti ravnomernye sily vsiu zemliu derzhat v otsepenenii . . .] (p.56), and, in order to preserve nature's equilibrium, bring disaster after disaster to human beings. Throughout the book there is reference to the distressing mortality of plants, to the way hills are worn flat by wind and rainfall, to how things and people vanish and leave only dried-up traces of themselves, to one's feelings vanishing even while one is feeling them. Thus: 'Serbinov sat there with that brief happiness of life which cannot be used – it is continually diminishing' [Serbinov sidel c tem kratkim schast'em zhizni, kotorym nel'zia pol'zovat'sia – ono vse vremia umen'shaetsia.] (p.363)

There are also several major statements, mostly in Dvanov's voice, about the essential sadness of living in time and in history. The word 'silently' stresses the sorrowful intonation of the statement.

> . . . the Revolution has passed, its harvest is gathered, now people silently eat the ripened grain, so that Communism should become the permanent flesh of the body. 'History is sad, because it is time and knows it will be forgotten', Dvanov said . . . [. . . revoliutsiia proshla, urozhai ee sobran, teper' liudi molcha ediat sozrevshee zerno, chtoby kommunizm stal postoiannoi plot'iu tela. – Istoriia grustna, potomu chto ona vremia i znaet, chto ee zabudut, - skazal Dvanov . . .] (p.324)

If, to make sense of history's sadness, we invoke Platonov's enthusiasm for Spengler, we recall that only history in the making was conceived as an alive, creative and celebratory dimension of existence, to be followed inevitably by mere matter, dead space, nature and grief – by, for example, the silent eating of the ripened grain. Shortly after this, another thought of Dvanov's reinforces the idea of a lamentable and insoluble paradox about living in time:

> Dvanov felt sorrow about the time that had passed: it was continually getting less and disappearing, while the human being remained in one place with his hope for the future, and Dvanov could guess why Chepurnyi and the Chevengur Bolsheviks so much desired Communism: it is an end to history, an end to time, but time moves only in nature, while in the human being stands yearning. [Dvanov pochuvstvoval tosku po proshedshemu vremeni: ono postoianno sbivaetsia i ischezaet, a chelovek ostaetsia na odnom meste so svoei nadezhdoi na budushchee; i Dvanov dogadalsia, pochemu Chepurnyi i bol'sheviki-chevengurtsy tak zhelaiut kommunizma: on est' konets istorii, konets vremeni, vremia zhe idet tol'ko v prirode, a v cheloveke stoit toska.] (p.340)

Again time is coupled with history and can be abolished with it; yet it is said to 'move only in nature' so that time, history and nature are grouped together as that which is undesirable; all constitute the condition which humans yearn to escape from.

In the piece just quoted, 'time' and 'yearning' are counter-balanced as if they were well-known antitheses. Time moves (or, rather, goes: idet) in nature, but yearning (toska) stands in the human being. The somewhat helpless vagueness this gives rise to in the quick-reading mind is a typical effect of Platonov's. But there is a true antithesis here, too - that between 'goes' and 'stands', and this yields the reflection that the essence of our division from nature, our not-being-at–home in the world, is the fact that something within us,

separate from time, stands still and watches, while around us nature goes on and on. In Chevengur, movement (to keep up with nature – or with time?) is on the whole presented as good, and keeping still - as bad; those who keep still are unhappy. [23] This is represented by the character Lui, a rare happy man who believes that Communism consists in unceasingly running from place to place. Indirectly, however, we gather that such running produces, or is accompanied by, a timeless stasis. For although it is Chepurnyi, the would-be stopper of time, who invokes the sun as the one unchanging basis and support for Communism, the word 'solstice' (solntsestoianie, the stopping of the sun), which comes only once in the whole book, occurs in connection not with Chepurnyi, but with Lui. 'Everywhere he [Lui] noticed above him the light of the solstice [obviously the midsummer solstice is meant – A.L.] from which the earth accumulated plants for food and gave birth to people for comradeship.' [. . .vsiudu on zamechal nad soboiu svet solntsestoianiia, ot kotorogo zemlia nakaplivala rasteniia dlia pishchi i rozhdala liudei dlia tovarishchestva.] (p.242) The words express Chepurnyi's purpose and belief, but that purpose seems achieved, in passing, by this man who speeds from place to place, instead of by Chepurnyi's Bolsheviks, settlers in the town.

Lui's achievement of sun-stance, however, his running with time, can no more be the solution to the enigma of time than can the actions of the Chevengur settlers, for the virtue of Lui's running is symbolically countered by the figure of Ahasuerus (Agasfer), the Eternal or Wandering Jew. This figure is mentioned twice: first, early in the novel, where he is described as someone 'living alone on the very line of the horizon' [zhivushchii odin na samoi cherte gorizonta] (p.107), and then later in the book, where he is the object of a collective vision: of a man walking along the horizon. Behind both references is the Ahasuerus of legend for whom never-ending movement is punishment and anguish. Like Lui, Ahasuerus walks never-endingly and this, so to speak, gets him nowhere. Like the

Chevengurians, he longs for the end of time, but his punishment is in time's permanence, its invincibility.

Thomas Seifrid's study of the atmosphere of 'belatedness' in Platonov's main fictional works is an important contribution to the exploration of the Platonovian modes of melancholy and lament in relation to time.[24] Seifrid notes that '. . . both the characters and the narrative voice in Platonov's works record a troubled sense of time's passing, much as they probe and refuse to take for granted existence itself. . . . .Platonov's texts are permeated by a sense of belatedness . . .' The state of the world presented in Chevengur, he argues, is one of 'continuing to exist beyond the point when anything which might constitute life (vigour, change, meaning) has already taken place'. Seifrid shows that this sensation of a 'ceaseless going-on-beyond-life' is attributed in a variety of forms to many of the novel's characters. Silent grieving about ever-passing time and ever-disappearing history, before and after the Revolution, as well as about the relentless continuation of nature, does indeed make up a large part of the mood of this book, in which the contradiction – to get rid of the grief of living in time means to get rid of life - is never confronted.

V

The Stopping of Time

To cheer up, and to gain control, people try to stop time. There are several variations on the project of stopping time. All of them are against the background of our knowledge that the pre-Bolshevik Chevengur inhabitants lived in constant expectation of the 'Second Coming of God' - an expectation which is exploited by the Bolsheviks when, in the very process of cutting those previous inhabitants' throats, they tell them that they, the Bolsheviks, are the Second Coming. (Or is it less the cynical exploiting of a naïve expectation than a confident enacting of the fulfilment of it?)

The fisherman's self-drowning at the beginning of the novel is his attempt to end time, not by ending his life but by discovering some new 'province' located under the sky 'as if at the bottom of cool water' [budto na dne prokhladnoi vody] (p.27) – as Platonov ambiguously and quaintly puts it. Later, the minor character Pashintsev defiantly attempts to hold up historical change - by creating a 'Revolutionary Reserve', where the years 1918 and 1919 are preserved ' . . . in an untouched heroic category . . .' [. . . v netronutoi geroiskoi kategorii . . .] (p.156). But the fisherman stops time for himself and Pashintsev preserves only a chosen date, while the central attempt, the Chevengur one, is to stop all time for everyone and for ever. What is unbearable in existence, they appear to assume, is not particular fates or events, but life in the dimension of time as such.

> Chepurnyi could not endure the enigma of time and he put a stop to history's length by speedily organising Communism – just as the fisherman could not endure his life and turned it into death so as to experience in advance the beauty of the other world. [. . .Chepurnyi ne vyterpel tainy vremeni i prekratil dolgotu istorii srochnym ustroistvom kommunizma v Chevengure, - tak zhe, kak rybak . . . ne vyterpel svoei zhizni i prevratil ee v smert', chtoby zaranee ispytat' krasotu togo sveta.] (p.323)

This is, once again, the thought of Dvanov, who is aware of the anguish felt by the controlling mind. He himself does not have such a mind. When we are told that in his youth he 'believed the revolution was the end of the world', this is immediately linked (with scarcely a gloss on the switch from 'end of the world' to 'new world') with the statement that 'in his clear feeling Aleksandr already <u>had</u> that new world…' [. . . veril, chto revoliutsiia – eto konets sveta. . . . V svoem iasnom chuvstve Aleksandr uzhe imel tot novyi svet . . .] (p.77). Dvanov differs from the other characters in that in some sense he already possesses the salvation they seek; the many indications of this include a statement about him given in

terms of clock time: Shumilin envies the alarm clock for keeping on working while he himself has to stop for sleep, but

> . . .Dvanov did not envy time – he felt he had life in reserve and knew he would manage to catch up with the movement of the clock. [A Dvanov vremeni ne zavidoval – on chuvstvoval svoiu zhizn' v zapase i znal, chto uspeet obognat' khod chasov.] (p.181)

Chepurnyi and his men, on the other hand, take action, basing it upon such slogans as 'Destroy the class enemy and win the eternity of Communism'. Destroying the non-Communist population, they believe they are creating the conditions for Communism to dawn the very next day, since Communism is that which, 'after the bourgeoisie . . . comes into being from Communists' [Posle burzhuazii . . . kommunizm proiskhodit iz kommunistov . . .] (p.345) and the town now does contain only Communists. When the new day dawns, the sun will never again go down. The account of Chepurnyi's vigil, that last pre-Communist night, is worth dwelling on. Several pages describe how he stays up, waiting for the end of time, alias the dawn of the future. This character, whose only mentioned facial feature is a 'weak nose', who is never able to formulate his thoughts, and who has just organised a mass murder, is depicted – here as elsewhere - with the strangely compelling and compassionate lyricism Platonov is uniquely versed in. While the remaining ten Bolsheviks, avoiding with touching sincerity the warm houses of the dead bourgeois enemies, sleep on a cold floor, Chepurnyi wanders about all night, 'with the sorrow of indistinct danger.' [so skorb'iu neiasnoi opasnosti.] (p.261) and time's melancholy now reaches an apogee of intensity:

> Defenceless sorrow lay over the whole of Chevengur – as in a father's house from which the mother's coffin has just been carried away, and along with the little orphaned boy the fences, burdocks and abandoned doorway are all grieving. And now the little boy leans his head against a fence, strokes the rough planks with his

hand and weeps in the darkness of an extinguished world, and his father wipes away his tears and says, never mind, everything will be all right later on, we'll get used to it. [Nad vsem Chevengurom nakhodilas' bezzashchitnaia pechal' – budto na dvore ottsa, otkuda nedavno vynesli grob s mater'iu, i o nei toskuiut, naravne s mal'chikov-sirotoi, zabory, lopukhi i broshennye seni. I vot mal'chik opiraetsia golovoi v zabor, gladit rukoi shershavye doski i plachet v temnote pogasshego mira, a otets utiraet svoi slezy i govorit, chto nichego, vse budet potom khorosho i privyknetsia.] (p. 260)

Although it is not stated that these are Chepurnyi's own childhood memories, there are tacit signs that they are, so we are offered an additional explanation of his great need for Communism. But this passage must also be read as an allegory of the grief felt by a Communist, paradoxically and tragically, for the passing of the non-Communist world. The destroyer of time grieves for the vanishing of the life that took place in time; the lament about time continues up to the very moment of time's abolition, even while the wrongness of living in time and the rightness of replacing it with timelessness are asserted to the end. With morning comes the expected dawn, first vision of heaven -

> . . . [he] saw another Chevengur: the cool open town, lit by the grey light of the still distant sun … the sun leaned dryly and firmly into the earth and the primal earth, in a weakness of exhaustion, began flowing with sap of grasses, dampness of loams, and was agitated by the whole hirsute widened-out steppe, while from tense dry patience the sun only burned and became stone. [. . .uvidel drugoi Chevengur: otkrytyi i prokhladnyi gorod, osveshchennyi serym svetom eshche dalekogo solntsa; . . . solntse upiralos' v zemliu sukho i tverdo - i zemlia pervaia, v slabosti iznemozhdeniia, potekla sokom trav, syrost'iu suglinkov i zavolnovalas' vseiu volosistoi rasshirennoi step'iu, a solntse tol'ko nakalialos' i kamenelo ot napriazhennogo sukhogo terpeniia.] (p.262, 264)

Although the language is as extraordinary as anywhere else in this novel (Sun leaned . . .earth, in a weakness of exhaustion . .[the sun's] tense, dry patience . . .), it is clearly an ordinary dawn - new and fearful only in that its qualities are now experienced as permanent and perfect. It turns out, however, that nothing has come to a stop except – inexplicably - Chepurnyi himself and his comrades.

> The Chevengur summer was passing, time was hopelessly going away in reverse relation to life, but Chepurnyi, together with the proletariat and the 'others'[25], had stopped amid the summer, amid time and all the turbulent elements, and was living in the peace of his joy … [Shlo chevengurskoe leto, vremia beznadezhno ukhodilo obratno zhizni, no Chepurnyi vmeste s proletariatom i prochimi ostanovilsia sredi leta, sredi vremeni i vsekh volnuiushchikhsia stikhii i zhil v pokoe svoei radosti . . .] (p.304)

Joyful he may be, but the sun goes down, autumn begins, the problems of winter are imminent, and there are numerous pointers to the failure of the time-ending experiment: art, family and sexual love have been excluded from the new order, but now women arrive, families are created, people start wanting music and art; then some of them leave altogether, a child dies, an old man suffers and dies, and all feel cold, while Kopenkin stamps about, objecting that what they have there is not Communism. Finally, mysterious, military-looking men on horseback turn up and shoot most of them dead. Time has moved on with a vengeance.

VI

Narrative Time

Meanwhile the narrative itself enacts a slowing down and stopping of time. In part, this effect is due to the author's reluctance to generalise, to sum up or to label events and historical periods. Avoidance of conventional labels is reflected in the youthful Dvanov's

meditations on the world's namelessness and in the depiction in some other characters (including Chepurnyi) of a hampering inability to formulate or sum anything up. The narrator's voice, too, conveys this inability, or preferred tendency, of the characters. Such summarizing terms as 'World War began', 'It was the year of Revolution', or 'Things changed in the NEP period', are used as rarely as possible and never in the main part of a sentence. The period of roughly 1910 to 1929 is covered but nowhere is any year numbered. Nor is any clock time given. The nearest thing to it is when Chepurnyi is asked by a stray visitor to sign something and write the date; as he knows neither month nor date but only that today is the fifth day since he introduced Communism, he writes: 'Summer 5 Com.' [Letom 5 kom.] (p.280) Seasons are mentioned, as are, frequently, positions and movements of sun, moon and stars, but measured points and periods of time are not. What makes time then seem so palpable?

One cause is the sheer frequency with which the word 'time' (vremia) is used, often without any normal necessity, so that it becomes a sort of accompanying chant: 'evening' is called 'the time of evening', 'morning' is 'morning time'…[26] Further, we are told again and again that time is passing, for example: 'The Chevengur summer was passing . . .time was hopelessly going away . .' [Shlo chevengurskoe leto, vremia beznadezhno ukhodilo obratno zhizni. . .] (p.304), or that - the opposite of passing - it is continuing, for example, 'night was quietly continuing' [noch' prodolzhalas' tikho]…(p.72), and in Platonov's uses of the verb 'continue' there seems a certain insistence – perhaps because they lead up to the description of Dvanov's last act: he goes down into the water, 'continuing his life ' [. . . prodolzhaia svoiu zhizn'] (p. 411). These repetitions and refrains contribute to a sense of gathering time, a sense which implicitly counters the characters' lament for its passing.

Iablokov notes[27] that only a few months appear to go by in the course of the novel and yet when Dvanov finally comes to Chevengur it is clear that seven or eight years have passed

in the outside world. He is right, too, that the narrative time slows down from beginning to end, becoming almost stationary in Part 3, the Chevengur section. This slowing down produces a sensation of (1) a huge amount of physical space in the novel, yet space which is all 'here', not spread out or extending to other places, and (2) a huge amount of time in it, all of it having a quality of now. Mornings, noons, evenings, nights, sun in the east, in the west, moonrise – all seem drawn into one immense present moment, as if nothing is happening in relation to them, and the tale, even as it goes on, stands still in a magical temporal stoppage, as if indeed standing within that permanent solstice, or sunstance, which Chepurnyi believed would come with Communism.

Just such a huge accumulation of unproceeding time was foretold near the book's beginning, in a passage describing Zakhar Pavlovich's surprise about time in his own life. He has always supposed that the older he gets the smaller will seem the amount of time left to him. Yet he is getting old and this is not happening. On the contrary:

> . . . life was growing and accumulating and the future ahead was also growing and stretching out – more deeply and mysteriously than in youth, as if he were stepping back from the end of his life … [. . . zhizn' rosla i nakoplialas', a budushchee vperedi tozhe roslo i prostiralos' – glubzhe i tainstvennei, chem v iunosti, slovno Zakhar Pavlovich otstupal ot kontsa svoei zhizni . .] (p.57)

Zakhar's intimations of an ever-increasing future are linked to the whole temporal shape which Chevengur has for the reader, with its slowing, gathering and bunching of sensed time. Something like this was contained in the passage discussed above (section II) about the expansion of present time for those working altruistically. These experiential episodes - Zakhar's and those workers' - epitomize the effect produced by the novel's very style and structure. In this way, while time expands in the experience of the characters, a still

more accessible salvation from time's pain may be being quietly suggested: a salvation through art. Not only is a sensation of the stopping of time part of the experience of the fictional personages, but the very mode of narration creates for the reader the sensation of its stoppage. Reason's attack on the world-enigma fails, but art's reiteration of the enigma leads us, with magnificent modesty, out of it.

To support this cheerful (perhaps too simple) view, let us consider a passage which, while certainly contributing to the impression of belatedness explored by Seifrid, appears to contain a hidden song about time, a lyrical confounding and uniting of all times, late and early:

> In the world it was like evening, and Dvanov felt that evening was beginning in himself, the time of maturity, time of happiness or regret. On an evening like this, his own evening of life, Dvanov's father had hidden himself for ever in the depth of Lake Mutevo, desiring to see, before time, the future morning. Now another evening was beginning; perhaps that day was already lived through, the morning of which the fisherman had wanted to see, and his son was again experiencing evening. [V mire bylo kak vecherom, i Dvanov pochuvstvoval, chto i v nem nastupaet vecher, vremia zrelosti, vremia schast'ia ili sozhaleniia. V takoi zhe, svoi vecher zhizni otets Dvanova navsegda skrylsia v glubine ozera Mutevo, zhelaia ran'she vremeni uvidet' budushchee utro. Teper' nachinalsia inoi vecher – byt' mozhet, uzhe byl prozhit tot den', utro kotorogo khotel videt' rybak, i syn ego snova perezhival vecher.] (p.323)

Just what this means is not easy to construe. At the beginning of the novel, the fisherman's desire was to find another province 'as if under the cool water' – that is, to find something spatial: death as a 'province'. Yet here his son thinks of him as having sought something temporal -–a 'future morning'. An imagining of space is perhaps being translated into an imagining of time, whereby (to recall Platonov's fascinated notes on Spengler) the

past is saved from death and spatiality into life and temporality, that is, into reality. Or perhaps the son, a Bolshevik after all, is merely interpreting his pre-revolutionary father's hope as a hope for revolution. (Revolution is of course often represented – in Platonov as in other writers - by 'dawn' or 'morning'.) There is a puzzle, too, in the phrase 'before time': it was not just 'in advance' (though the idiom does mean 'in advance') that the fisherman desired to see 'the future morning' but 'before time' – before the right time, before he had the right to it? Or before all time, out of time altogether, free of time? Then, although the fisherman's and his son's evenings are placed, linguistically, very close together (the word 'evening' is used six times in these six lines), in the plot they are far apart. Between them the entire event of the revolution (the world's transformation, the coming of the new world) may - it is suggested but not stated - have already taken place, with the present 'evening' coming after it. Indeed, this is what the plot of the novel has been telling us. Meanwhile the words 'perhaps that day was already lived through…' intimate that those grand events may not have happened, perhaps nothing has happened and that day has merely passed by like all days, so that now, presumably, nothing can happen – which would be close to saying "perhaps there is no time".

These uncertainties, contained in the quoted passage, epitomize uncertainties out of which the whole of Chevengur is constructed. What is, however, certain, throughout the book and especially palpably in this slight passage, is the sheer presence of time. The litany-like recurrence of 'morning', 'day', 'evening', is itself what is 'happening'; time is being sung of, at once lamented and celebrated, and, above all, made audible, perceptible and absolutely present. But the absolute presence of time is the stopping of time.

NOTES

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All translations from the Russian are my own.

1. G.J. Whitrow, What is Time? London, 1972, p. 7.

2.Andrei Platonov, Chevengur, written 1928, first published in full in 1988. Page references in this article are to the Moscow 'Khudozhestvennaia literatura' edition of 1988. The only English translation of this novel is Andrei Platonov, Chevengur, translated by Anthony Olcott, Ann Arbor, MI, 1978; three chapters from it have been published in the translation by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler (with Nadya Bourova, Angela Livingstone, David Macphail and Eric Naiman) in The Portable Platonov, 20, Moscow, 1999.

3. [. . .dass wir nicht sehr verlässlich zu Haus sind / in der gedeuteten Welt.'] Rainer Maria Rilke, Erste Duineser Elegie, Werke in drei Bänden, vol. i, Frankfurt am Main, 1955, p. 441.

4. 'Zhizn' do kontsa' (1921) in A. Platonov, Vozvrashchenie, Moscow, 1989, p. 41.

5. Andrei Platonov, Potomki solntsa, Fantasticheskie proizvedeniia, Moscow, 1987, pp. 13-24.

6. 'Antony and Cleopatra', Act 1, Scene 5.

7. On sectarianism in the Voronezh region in the 19th and early 20th centuries and its probable reflection in Chevengur see A. Evdokimov, 'Sektantsvo i "Chevengur"' in "Strana filosofov" Andreia Platonova: problemy tvorchestva, ed. N.V. Kornienko, vyp. 4, Moscow, 2000, pp. 542-7.

8. On Aleksandr Bogdanov's influence on Platonov see, for example, Thomas Seifrid, Andrei Platonov. Uncertainties of Spirit, Cambridge,1992, pp.24-27.

9. For an account of Fedorov's importance to Platonov see Mikhail Geller, Andrei Platonov v poiskakh schast'ia, Moscow, 1999 (originally Paris, 1982), pp.28-53; Ayleen Teskey, Platonov and Fyodorov. The Influence of Christian Philosophy on a Soviet Writer, Avebury, 1982; Thomas Seifrid, Andrei Platonov (see note 8), pp. 20-24.

10. On Minkowski's 1908 lecture in Kőln see Whitrow, What is Time? (Note 1), pp. 122f.

11. 'Slyshnye shagi' in Andrei Platonov, Vozvrashchenie, Moscow, 1989, pp.38-40.

12. Vozvrashchenie, p.39.

13. Vozvrashchenie, p. 40.

14. Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), Der Untergang des Abendlandes, 1918 , translated by C.F. Atkinson as The Decline of the West, London, 1926 (vol. I) and 1928 (vol. II).

15. Platonov's essay discussing Spengler's ideas is to be found in: N.V. Kornienko, Istoriia teksta i biografiia Andreia Platonova (1926-46), Zdes' i teper', No. 1, Moscow, 1993, pp. 44-53.

15. Kornienko, p. 47. On Platonov and Spengler, see also N.K. Kornienko, '"Simfoniia soznaniia" Andreia Platonova. Ob istochnikakh i kommentarii teksta', in Osushchestvlennaia vozmozhnost'. Andrei Platonov i XX vek,Voronezh, 2001, pp. 61-70.

16. Kornienko, p. 47.

17. Kornienko, p. 50.

18. Kornienko, p. 47.

19. Kornienko, p. 51.

20. Robert Hodel, Erlebte Rede bei Andrej Platonov. Von V zvezdnoj pustyne bis Čevengur, Frankfurt-am-Main, etc, 2001, p. 121. Hodel distinguishes three stages in the narrative: 1. diffuse beginnings of a utopia; 2. the communism of Chepurnyi and Prokofii (the 'first Chevengur'); and 3. Dvanov's community (the 'second Chevengur'); the second Chevengur is characterised by Work and Reconciliation. See also: A. Livingstone, ' Khristianskie motivy v romane "Chevengur"', in 'Strana filosofov' Andreia Platonova: problemy tvorchestva, vyp. 4, Moscow, 2000, pp. 556-61; p. 560.

21. A particularly good study of the subtlety and quasi-invisibility of many of Platonov's stylistic effects is Olga Meerson, "Svobodnaia veshch'": poetika neostraneniia u Andreia Platonova, Berkeley, CA, 1997.

22. [Razum, pokazyvaet Platonov, printsipial'no, po svoei prirode, neset tendentsiiu k "biurokraticheskomu", utopicheskomu vospriiatiiu mira, stremitsia "obrubit'" beskonechno mnogoobraznye sviazi mezhdu iavleniiami i nekii fragment real'nosti . . . vydat' za model' real'nosti v tselom. Prezhde vsego eto vidno v zhelanii ogranichit' prostranstvo . . . i ostanovit' vremia: po suti, otmenit' to i drugoe.] Evgenii Iablokov, 'O filosofskoi pozitsii Andreia Platonova', Russian Literature, 32, 1992, pp. 227-51 (p. 240).

23. This was pointed out to me by Valerii Viugin.

24. Thomas Seifrid, 'Forms of Belatedness in Platonov's prose', A Hundred Years of Andrei Platonov, 'Platonov Special Issue' in two volumes of Essays in Poetics, nos 26 and 27, ed. Angela Livingstone, publ. at Keele University, 2001 (vol. i) and 2002 (vol. ii), pp. 38-48.

25. The crowd of down-and-outs brought in to populate the town after the murder of the previous inhabitants are consistently known as 'prochie' - the others, the etcetera, the extra people.

26. For a study of these repetitions, see Mariia Dmitrovskaia, 'Tsiklicheskoe vremia u Andreia Platonova', Osushchestvlennaia vozmozhnost', (see note 15 above) pp. 36-50.

27. Iablokov, Na beregu neba, p.16.